

Background

The Human Resources Steering Committee of the NC Association of County Commissioners met on March 16 to discuss possible issues to present to the NC Aging Policy Forum in preparation for the fall 2005 White House Conference on Aging. The committee was assisted in its deliberation by Mr. Dennis Streets, Chief of Planning, Budget and Systems Supports at the NC Division of Aging. The committee asked that a special survey be sent to the county managers to determine the appropriate priorities for the NCACC to propose.

- Adul Sewio

Analysis

Of the 26 responses, 100% of the respondents indicated either access to affordable health care or the high cost of drugs as a priority issue in their county. Some of the respondents specifically mentioned the need to stabilize Medicare, since it is the primary insurance provider for most elderly citizens.

A closely related issue mentioned by 30% of the respondents was the need for income security, especially the need to accommodate an older workforce through re-training and through sensitizing employers to the capabilities of the elderly. These responses indicate a clear recognition of the aging of the workforce and fears of losing social security income. Accommodating older workers was viewed as a way to extend employer health insurance benefits and to help pay for expensive medications.

More than 50% of the respondents indicated the need for additional in-home and community based care as a priority issue. Most of these responses expressed the need for additional funds for these services. Many respondents expressed concerns about the perceived bias towards institutionalization and hospitalization in the Medicare/Medicaid payment systems. A related issue was raised by five county agencies that identified the need for more "senior friendly" planning of communities, with walkable neighborhoods, access to transportation networks, and location of other support services close by. Access to services at the community level was a clear priority need.

One third of the respondents placed a priority on the need for access to transportation services. Transportation was identified as a critical component of preventive health care and a fundamental element of maintaining a healthy life style. Some respondents identified access to transportation as an important part of preventive health care for the elderly, not just because it allows the elderly to keep medical appointments, but also because it inhibits isolation and de-socialization. The high cost of providing transportation in the rural counties was a concern.

Other issues identified by at least four respondents each were:

- Housing (access, on-going maintenance/repair)
- Senior centers (more of them, standardized programs)
- Long term care (comprehensive planning and availability)
- Information access (seniors don't know what programs are available to them)
- Workforce (quality of caregivers, including need for training and standards, inadequate respite caregivers, aging caregivers for elderly family members)

Based on these responses, the NC Association of County Commissioners submits the following three priorities for presentation to the 2005 White House Conference on Aging:

- Access to affordable health care, including prescription drugs. A basic national health benefit program is a possible solution, if it is streamlined and simplified, with variable co-pays based on income levels.
- More funding for in-home and community based care. The solution is to reauthorize and increase funds provided through the Older Americans Act, and to modify Medicare and Medicaid policies to support services provided in the home.
- Access to transportation services in both rural and urban areas. The solution is more funding for local comprehensive planning for senior-friendly communities, and additional funds for the development of rural transportation networks.